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AUTHOR Newton, Sandra S.
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ABSTRACT

The use of word processing in composition classes provides the student with both the opportunity to experience a significant technology and the ability to improve the mechanics and style of their writing. Word processing software has many benefits over "drill and practice" programs, "dialogue" software, and "whole process" programs, since word processing software is readily available and a flexible learning tool. When used directly by the student, word processing makes all stages of the composing process (i.e., drafting, writing, and revising) easier and more meaningful. When used by the instructor, word processing software makes possible a higher degree of individualization in the classroom. As long as the program is capable of storing files and formatting output, it streamlines the exchange of information and the creation of well-presented material. More sophisticated word processors have even greater capabilities, and allow for greater flexibility in manipulating material through features such as embedding (which allows remarks to be inserted into documents on the screen but not to be printed out onto paper); split screens (which allow the writer to keep in sight two different parts of the composition); inserting material; global search (which allows the writer to rapidly search a document for intrusive or annoying repetitions of a word or phrase); word wrap (which automatically moves whole words from the end of one line to the beginning of the next); and spelling check features. (LAL)

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USING THE WORD PROCESSOR IN COMPOSITION

Sandra S. Newton
Professor of English
Mattatuck Community College
Waterbury, Connecticut

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of the National Council of Teachers of English
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Portland, Maine

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ABSTRACT
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Word processing in Composition classes provides the student with both the opportunity to experience a significant technology and the ability to improve both mechanics and style. When used directly by the student, word processing makes all stages of the composing process (drafting, writing, and revising) easier and, often, more meaningful. When used by the instructor, word processing software makes possible a higher degree of individualization.

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Using The Word Processor in Composition

The technology that led to the introduction of the computer in education is no longer new, although we might concede that the refinement and sophistication of that technology continues to affect education. Fortunately, however, much of the computer literacy that was originally demanded of educators, no matter what their discipline, has been abandoned. We are seldom called upon to demonstrate rudimentary knowledge of programming (in whatever language); we are no longer required to understand Boolean logic or binary systems; in short, the term "computer literate" is now (or, should be) understood to mean the following:

> "I know a computer when I see one."
> "I can turn a computer on and insert a disk properly."
> "I have a healthy respect for, rather than anxiety about, the computer's power and possibilities."

Aside from these somewhat facetious definitions of computer literacy, a more important understanding has emerged for educators outside the immediate discipline of computer science and the related disciplines of mathematics, science, and technologies: to be "computer literate" is, most importantly, to be "software fluent." If there has been any really noteworthy change in education relative to computers, it has been in the area of software. As generalists, we have "tamed" the machine first by acknowledging its usefulness to pedagogy but, next and more importantly, by learning and using, in both critical and

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creative ways, the software (i.e., programs) developed for the computer. The result has been that, for the end user, hardware considerations and programming abilities are truly secondary. "What can the machine do?" really means, "What programs will be most relevant and useful to my discipline?"

Thus, for the social sciences, simulations and statistical manipulation programs are popular. For the fine arts and skills areas, process-analysis programs are utilized. For all liberal arts areas, as well as for occupational programs, objective-test generation is useful, as is the capability for database searching in research projects. For composition, as distinct from literature and reading, the word processor (appropriated largely from secretarial sciences) is the program most useful to both the student and the instructor.

Computer software came late to composition, and I suspect that the primary reason is because of the very nature of composition as a discipline. Composition is unique in many ways. It is a "skill" and needs to draw on pedagogical techniques of all skills areas (such as intensive practice to develop mastery). It contains some knowledge-based elements, but there is seldom, if ever, a single "body of knowledge" which all students are required to master (that is, knowledge of grammatical terminology or of rhetorical modes does not necessarily guarantee appropriate application to a writing task). Textbooks, handbooks, readers, and similar materials are helpful in composition, but they are relatively useless when the student becomes a writer whose

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primary tool is the brain and whose product is the idea realized concretely on paper.

The first commercial computer software offered to composition instructors is of the "drill and practice" variety: a grammatical or mechanical rule is stated, and the user is required to apply the rule to a series of sentences. The most obvious, although not the only, limitation of this kind of software is that the student's success must be partly attributed to the fact that he or she *knows* there is an error to correct; that knowledge, to the endless frustration of composition instructors, is not consistently applied to the student's own writing. A similar kind of software promoted to composition faculty is the "authoring" program: the implicit promise is that the instructor can "create" units or lessons as needed by particular students or groups of students. No matter how imaginative the teacher, however, these lessons are still nothing more than "drill and practice."

What next evolved in composition software is "dialogue" material. While certainly an improvement over drill and practice, the drawback of this approach is, ironically, its most attractive feature: it attempts to simulate the kind of pointed discussion the instructor might have with the student regarding the planned content of a paper. But, because it is "simulation," it cannot and does not apply critical standards to the student's responses which, sometimes, may be nonsense or sincere confusion ("I don't know"), to which the program might

respond, ludicrously, "Interesting!" or "Tell me more...." At its worst, such a program inadvertently reinforces the student's poor thinking and planning skills by tacit and undiscriminating acceptance of input.

Finally, what are we in composition left with? A notable achievement is the development of what are called "whole process" programs which attempt to deal with *all* aspects of the composing process. At this writing, however, such programs are scarce; those that exist are either machine-specific (created for use on only a single brand of computer), licensed selectively (for use in only one or a specified group of schools), or still under development. Growing in popularity, on the other hand, are word processing programs because of their availability on all makes and models of computers and because of their flexibility as a learning tool. It is not surprising that, despite the explosion of quality software in education, composition instruction is still the undeveloped or underdeveloped area; perhaps, like the perfect textbook in composition, the perfect software in composition - one that meets the needs of all pedagogical approaches and learning styles - simply does not exist and perhaps never will, given the nature of the discipline. Word processing as a teaching strategy or tool meets some real needs, and it allows some advantages not otherwise available in the typical composition-class environment. So, although it falls short of the ideal, word processing can be used constructively to teach and learn composition, or efficiently to replace some of

the unwieldy, less attractive methods of traditional delivery systems of learning.

USES OF THE WORD PROCESSOR

One of the benefits of introducing word processing software to the learner is the acquired familiarity with a new technology. While this may not initially appear to be significant, it provides ultimate value that is useful in both the short- and long range of the learner's experience. Such exposure to a new technology, on a manageable level, provides the learner with a sense of achievement, some measure of self-confidence, and a real, if limited, knowledge of one aspect of the world of computers.

At the most basic level, students gain in manual dexterity (for some remedial and learning-disabled students, this is invaluable): the non-typist begins to learn how to type by repeated use of the keyboard; the typist sharpens and refines his or her skill by regular use. Moreover, the necessity of learning the commands through which a word processing program is utilized provides a tangible "body of knowledge" on which the student can build after a course in composition is completed.

There is not much, after all, that the student needs to master to begin working with word processing software: booting the program, creating, loading, and saving files is sufficient. Simple, clear, and "transparent" word processing programs (that is, those which display help screens or menus of commands during

use) make the student's encounter with the new technology a fruitful and satisfying one, often diminishing or banishing whatever "technophobia" the student may bring to the experience.

More directly pertinent to composition, the word processor contributes to improvement of the student's writing in particular ways. For example, because word processing operates through file maintainance, the instructor has the opportunity to generate his or own "help files" for student access. For example, a series of help files on "Common Misuses" may exist on a disk available for class use. Each file, no more than five to ten lines of text, covers a common misuse, such as the differences between "to," "too," and "two." At any time - composing or revising - the student may load and read that file (labeled "Common Misuses.To"), make the appropriate choice, and then delete the file from the screen in order to continue writing/revising.

The existence and accessibility of such Mechanics files are initially helpful to the instructor who, in correcting compositions on screen, can either cite the help file to which the student should refer or actually load and place in the student's composition the contents of the help file. While citation is certainly easier (and more commonly echoes red-pen corrections made manually), actual placement of the file into the student text demands that, before re-submitting the composition, the student at least delete the inserted help file. While this doesn't insure that the student has read the file, it provides the opportunity for learning to take place.

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Once procedures are established whereby student writing is consistently done on-screen, it is more likely that the student will access those help files during the early stages of writing and/or in revisions made prior to first submission to the instructor. It is, in fact, the technology that makes such a phenomenon likely. The file is readily accessible; compared to thumbing through a handbook or dictionary, the student gets an almost instantaneous answer to a grammatical or stylistic question. The file is non-judgmental; there is no possibility of a conscious or unconscious evaluation of relevance, worth, or competence. The file is immediate; it is used when and as needed, no matter what time of the day or night, as long as the student is on the computer. And the file is efficient; it provides a succinct explanation unadorned by exercises, narrative material, or the like.

Further, student writing is improved with elementary use of a word processor through the ease with which text is manipulated. The most basic manipulation is deletion of incorrect or unwanted material. A single keystroke can erase characters, and menu options allow deletion of blocks of text, whether a word, a phrase, a sentence, or a paragraph. Material can be formatted (margins, paragraph indents, spacing) with relative ease. Finally, within the confines of a system whereby all compositions are written and saved to disk, and accessed on-screen by the instructor, recommended changes to the material can be immediately visualized and accomplished.

Thus, equipping students with an elementary grasp of a word processing program, although initially time-consuming, returns dividends of precious time that the student spends in the composing process. Further, that time is often of a finer quality, allowing attentiveness to and concentration on the more significant elements of writing. The instructor, too, sees benefits seldom realized in other composing environments, such as classroom group work, assigned at-home writing, and even conferencing.

Whether classroom work involves lecture or discussion, the instructor must depend on a textbook or student notes to provide information to the learner once he or she is removed from the physical classroom itself. However, even if we assume that the student uses the textbook as a resource, we cannot always be sure that the material is comprehended fully. Student notes are even more unreliable insofar as their accuracy and completeness depend so much on the listener. Word processing software can be utilized to close these gaps. At the one extreme, lecture or discussion material is put into files for reference or review as needed; in this case, the classroom work remains relatively unchanged, and the files exist as accurate records of that classroom work. At the other extreme, traditional classroom environments are abandoned completely, and the classroom is individualized into the student's computer station (whether at school or at home). Lecture material is stored in files for reading; individual comments and questions may be appended; files

are updated as needed. In this way, material may be revised to meet the appropriate levels of individual students or groups of students. Of course, variants of and modifications to these extremes are always possible.

Composition assignments that are taken home to be worked on usually provide the student with sufficient time to think about, plan, organize, write, and then revise a topic. It is, however, the rare student (or instructor, for that matter, in a similar situation) who utilizes that time completely or efficiently. Procrastinating, waiting until the "last possible moment," is the general rule; as a result, a significant amount of time is spent on *rewriting* (not revising) an assignment neatly for submission.

When a word processor is plugged into this process, a number of new elements are introduced. First, when writing is stored on disk as a method of submission, and no paper ("hardcopy") is exchanged, that "rewrite" time is unnecessary, allowing allotment of that time to revision tasks. Second, when computer stations available to students are restricted by time or space or lack of sufficient hardware, the student graphically understands the need to organize his or her time around available computer access. Further, the time spent on the computer is generally intensive and concentrated. In short, not only *what* is accomplished but its quality dramatically improves. Third, the revising process is better, if in no other way than in the fact that fewer typographical errors (seeing a word that isn't there, letter

transpositions, and the like) occur, in large measure because we never type faster than we think, and the mechanical nature of keyboarding gives us greater pause for thinking, for looking at clusters of meaning as we type, rather than attending to the forming of mere individual characters as we do in longhand.-- Finally, as alluded to above, the very act of correcting is simplified to single keystrokes in many instances. Formatting adjustments that are necessitated by corrections are performed automatically by the program, making the writer more willing to proofread and edit, because these tasks require little or no attention to the purely mechanical chores of margin maintainance, pagination, or consistency of text layout. Once these minor problems begin to be taken care of before submission, the instructor is "liberated" for devoting attention to the greater concerns of structure, development, and coherence.

Finally, conference time with students can be more meaningful and more pointedly geared to individual problems if the instructor utilizes the word processing help files for areas of weakness common to a group or majority of students. Those files eliminate the need to say the same thing to five or ten or twenty different students at different conference times, for the files are simply downloaded to or copied to the student's disk for referral. That precious and always-too-brief conference time can be totally devoted to the student's unique needs.

USING SOPHISTICATED WORD PROCESSORS

It should be clear, then, that any word processor can be used to assist both the student and the instructor in improving the writing process. Essentially, as long as the program is capable of storing files and formatting output (even if only margins and centering and/or indenting), it streamlines the exchange of information and the creation of well-presented material.

More sophisticated word processors, of course, are capable of far more. Although these may be somewhat more difficult to learn, the time invested allows for a much greater flexibility in manipulating material and, thus, may be time worth investing. Certainly, the kind of word processor an instructor chooses to use may well depend on what the instructor perceives to be the students' levels of interest and adaptability to the general computer environment. It is possible, for example, to begin all students with a simple word processor, and to watch for those students who, sooner or later, seem ready and willing to be introduced to more powerful programs whose greater variety of features can be utilized in the delivery of learning.

One of the characteristics of these "advanced" word processors is known as "embedding." This feature allows remarks to be inserted into documents on the screen but not to be printed out onto paper. Usually, a simple keystroke at the left margin of a line of text alerts the program that embedding is being used. The ostensible purpose of embedding is to communicate with the program during the creation of a document without

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interrupting the content. Thus, if the writer wishes to indent and single space a cited quotation in a traditionally double-spaced document, there is no need to actually type the indented, single-spaced lines. Two "embedded commands" are entered, indicating to the program that, until further notice, all succeeding material needs to be formatted as a cited quotation. (Indeed, as I am typing this document right now, I have embedded a command for double-spacing although I am actually typing single-spaced on the screen.) Embedding was created to allow changes in document formatting as needed.

Because, however, embedded commands do not appear in final printings of hardcopy, they provide the instructor with the ideal environment for making marginal comments on student papers. Thus, as the instructor is reviewing a student composition on the screen, he or she may embed a comment about unity, coherence, development, or simple mechanics. When the instructor saves a copy of the student's file, those comments are also saved, allowing both student and instructor to have "annotated" files of work. (It might be noted that the same ability to comment may be used, although more intrusively, in the simpler word processing programs: as long as computers work in both upper/lower case modes, the instructor may insist that students utilize both while the instructor retains upper case for commenting.)

Embedding, it may be seen, is the electronic, computerized counterpart of commenting in the margins of student papers. Its greatest advantage, however, is that the comment need not be

abbreviated to fit into one- or two-inch margin spaces. The computer allows the "expansion" of a document (the equivalent of making "elbow room") with the simple touch of the Return key. Comments may be as discursive, detailed, and fully developed as the instructor deems necessary. Finally, those comments may be deleted easily from the document as corrections or revisions are made; or, if desired, the comments may be retained as a permanent record of the kinds of revisions needed in successive rewrites of the document.

Another feature of advanced word processing software is the use of what are commonly called "windows" and "split screens." These allow the writer (or, later, the reader) to keep in sight two different parts of a composition. Its equivalent, of course, is the writer keeping page one visible while writing page two or three. A common student error in composition is repetition, not only of phrasing, but of whole sentences and/or ideas. Another equally common error of inexperienced writers is moving illogically or tangentially from one idea to another. The split screen in word processing allows any part of a document to be kept physically visible before the writer's eyes while a subsequent part of the material is being created. Thus, if a student can be persuaded (or required) to create an outline prior to writing, that outline, or the pertinent section of it, can be held stationary on the upper half of the screen while the composition is being written directly below. For that matter, the "outline" may be nothing more than a list, generated

initially, to remind the writer of points that need to be covered in the composition.

The split screen or window is also useful to the writer or instructor during the revising process. The content of a paragraph might be improved not only by rewriting but also by placement elsewhere in a composition. The split screen allows the writer or reader to actually see, not just conjecture, how paragraph placement affects emphasis and significance. Unlike the manual cut-and-paste, which is time-consuming and inefficient, split-screening is accomplished within seconds, and the subsequent manipulation of paragraphs for organizing purposes is done with relatively few keystrokes.

There are, in fact, few if any features of sophisticated word processing programs which cannot be useful in composition. Inserting material, particularly in underdeveloped paragraphs, is accomplished instantaneously without disrupting other sections of a composition and without the need for retyping or "copying" over the entire composition. The use of "global search" features in a word processor allow the writer to rapidly search a document for intrusive or annoying repetitions of a word or phrase. A word that is consistently misspelled throughout a document can be corrected just once by the writer; the program will, on command, correct all subsequent misspellings. The processor's word wrap feature (which automatically moves whole words from the end of one line to the beginning of the next) is a convenience which eliminates the need for hyphenation. Conversely, if a student is

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determined to need practice in correct hyphenation, word wrap can be disabled. Footnoting, centering, and column alignment can all be accomplished electronically rather than manually. Document length is constantly updated by the program, giving the writer some idea of the amount of material generated. Overall, although all of these features can be done manually, it is simply not worthwhile to do so when the machine can do them faster and more efficiently. Further, once the program is directed to accomplish these tasks, it also adjusts the total document or composition as needed; such is not the case when working in the non-electronic environment.

Finally, a companion program to the word processor should be noted: the spelling checker. This kind of software, like the word processor, varies in capability and quality, but is generally useful to the beginner and advanced writer alike. Whether a misspelling is a typographical error or actual ignorance of correct spelling is less important than the fact that a spelling checker, given an adequate dictionary file (which can often be updated by the writer), will more rapidly and more carefully scan a composition for words it does not recognize. In most cases, the spelling program will not correct the word for the writer; the value, then, is in assisting the writer to recognize a potential weakness that needs attention, whether poor spelling skills or inattentive typing.

All of these uses of the word processor demand a relative familiarity with the program which cannot be acquired except

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through regular use. Clearly, though, once the writer understands how such a program frees him/her from repetitive, boring, or mechanical tasks, a new attitude and motivation often surfaces. Writing, after all, is not just what is said, and not even just how something is said; it is these, but it also involves how an idea "looks" in a printed medium. The word processor eliminates the need to be attentive to how the ideas look on the page, often the most menial labor that attends writing (but, unfortunately, the one beginning writers concentrate and spend the most time on). Continued use of word processing software promotes attention to how ideas are or can be expressed - organizing, developing, and structuring. Some professional writers, for example, have commented on how "electronic writing" has facilitated subtle and positive alterations in the writing process, such as better seeing the growth of ideas, working in piecemeal fashion on large tasks (thereby allowing greater attention to specific development), and being more conscious of precise structure because of the ease with which they may move through the various parts of their writing.

There is, of course, no comparison intended between those who find writing a convenient or preferred method of communicating and those for whom writing is a cumbersome and sometimes frustratingly unrewarding task. Yet, the agony and the problems may be the same, differing primarily in degree. The interested writer, moreover, knows that the results will be worth

the work invested; the unwilling writer does not. Word processing helps the latter, in a variety of ways, to visualize and achieve some of those worthwhile results. And this may be the one step towards success that makes the difference for composition students.

[Appended to this paper are samples of how some of the features of word processing assists in writing and some brief comments on selected software and hardware requirements.]

Sandra S. Newton

October 1985

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HELPFILE.Your/You're

Your - indicates possession, similar to "my" or "our"

You're - is a contraction of "you are" [notice that the "a" in "are" has been replaced with an apostrophe.

STILL NOT SURE? Then read your sentence and insert either "our" or "you are", deciding which one makes sense, saying what you mean!

HELPFILE.thesis statement

A THESIS STATEMENT is a complete sentence that expresses a point of view.
Please note:
1. it's a complete sentence (see HELPFILE.sentence)
2. it has a point of view or opinion about a subject

What a thesis statement isn't:
a. it isn't a title:
"My Summer Vacation" [not a sentence; no point of view]
b. it isn't a statement of fact:
"Columbus discovered America in 1492" [not a point of view]
c. it isn't an announcement:
"I'm going to write about...."
"This paper is about...."

IF YOU'RE NOT SURE: look at HELPFILE.good theses for pointers on narrowing, focusing, and otherwise strengthening your thesis.

EXCERPT FROM A STUDENT FILE, ANNOTATED BY INSTRUCTOR (EMBEDDING)

The Original File

Being a teenager had its ups and downs but the happy times will forever be implanted in my mind. The happiest of which was my first true romantic attachment, to a young man that has already been through many of life's obstacles. I have tried over and over again to condem him for his past mistakes but my anger and mistrust just seem to dissappear whenever I see those brown eyes crying out for someone to say that I understand; that I care; + I will be here for you whenever you need me. Sometimes I wonder whether or not he knows how I feel; how I hurt when he withold crucial information that threatens to upset our lives. But I can't expect him to read my mind. Can I?

The Annotated Version

Being a teenager had its ups and downs but the happy times will forever be implanted in my mind.

==========
.START NEW PARAGRAPH BY INDENTING
.SEE HELPFILE.CONJUNCTIONS for information on using correct punctuation with words like "but"
==========

The happiest of which was my first true romantic attachment, to a young man that has already been through many of life's obstacles.

==========
.RE-READ "The happiest of which...." IT'S NOT A SENTENCE! Check HELPFILE.sentences if you're not sure!
.SPELLING ERROR: "condem" - please look it up.
==========

I have tried over and over again to condem him for his past mistakes but my anger and mistrust just seem to dissappear whenever I see those brown eyes crying out for someone to say that I understand; that I care; + I will be here for you whenever you need me.

==========
.SPELLING ERROR: "dissappear" - please think about the use of prefixes like "dis-" and how it changes or doesn't change the word to which it's attached.
.LOOK UP HELPFILE.semicolons. You don't need to use semicolons here.
==========

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Sometimes I wonder whether or not he knows how I feel; how I hurt when he withold crucial information that threatens to upset our lives.

==========

.SUBJECT-VERB AGREEMENT. "...when he withold" [verb is also misspelled]

==========

But I can't expect him to read my mind. Can I?

==========

GENERAL COMMENTS: The opening paragraph is weakened by the fact that you begin with a thesis statement of "the happiest times" and really go on to discuss how the young man makes you UNHAPPY! You've got a few ideas working in this first paragraph - more than necessary - and you need to reorganize your information.

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HARDWARE REQUIREMENTS

You need the following for each student:

1. a computer with at least 48k
   --must have upper/lower case capability
   --should have 80-column screen (simulating the size of a piece of 8.5 x 11 paper)
2. a single disk drive; dual disk drive if possible
3. a monitor (color is unnecessary)

You need the following for the computer room:

1. individual stations for each computer unit
2. one printer per three or four computers, including the interface cards to the printer

SOFTWARE

You should have at least two copies of a word processing program as well as several blank disks for file storage. At least one copy of the documentation should be available to students and/or index cards on which is written the most basic information students need to know about booting, loading, and saving material.

A good basic program, available on many computers, is BANK STREET WRITER, the Scholastic version, which was made for educational settings. Another is SCREEN WRITER. Good intermediate programs include FORMAT II, PFS:WRITE, PIEWRITER, and EASYWRITER. The best-known, but most expensive, advanced program is WORD STAR, which runs on CP/M. This means that if you have computers like Apples, you will have to add CP/M hardware cards. Some computer manufacturers have produced word processing software particular to their machines (like APPLEWRITER II and APPLEWRITER IIe); these are generally quite good.

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